

## Reviews

**L.J. Vander Zee. *Christ, Baptism and the Lord's Supper: Recovering the Sacraments for Evangelical Worship*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2004. (249pp.)**

One could legitimately assume that a denomination named after a sacrament would have a focused and theologically robust doctrine of that sacrament. It is thus ironic that Baptists, so obviously named after one of the two Protestant sacraments, are somewhat ambivalent about their sacramentology. While most Baptist churches still insist on believer's baptism many pastors and laity would struggle to give a theological account of the sacraments. In contrast, Reformation denominations are insistent that the sacraments are theologically crucial to the Church and its ministry and thus have a developed sacramentology. In contrast to Baptists, the Reformation tradition places great emphasis on infant baptism, arguing that this practice best supports the theology and tradition of the Scriptures and the Church.

The fundamental issue behind these divergent understandings of the sacraments has to do with the nature of the finished work of Christ and its application to believers. Baptists stress the individual acceptance of faith by the believer and thus insist upon a *believer's* baptism as the so-called 'outward confession of an inward faith'. The Lord's Supper becomes a ceremony of acceptance and commemoration of Christ. Older traditions such as the Reformed stress the corporate nature of the sacraments and thus place more emphasis on the idea of covenant and community belonging. For this tradition baptism is a sign and a *seal* of faith, a so-called 'means of grace' which not only signifies grace but also imparts it to the recipient. Likewise, the Lord's Supper is a means of grace and has more to do with a covenant renewal ceremony than an individual's commemoration. If the recipient of baptism is an infant, then they grow into the faith that has been signified and sealed but do so as part of the covenant community. This, they argue, is theologically superior to the Baptist practice as it is a more direct symbol and sign of Christ's redeeming work *for* and *on behalf* of the 'sinner'. For the former the sacraments are an ordinance marking a *believer's* profession of faith. For the latter they are a sign and seal of *God's* act of grace. This is, at least, how Leonard Vander Zee puts it.

Vander Zee, pastor of a Christian Reformed Church in Indiana, USA, attempts to bring these two traditions, Baptist and Reformed, into dialogue in order to reach a common consensus on what the sacraments are, what they stand for, and how best they should be administered and partaken of. He calls for clarity on the issue and for understanding from both sides. He even concludes that Baptists and Reformed Christians can share a common communion despite divergent practices. He would ask Baptist churches to consider the possibility of allowing infant baptism to those who asked for it as long as the recipient, minister, and congregation understood the theology behind the sacraments.

Fundamental to Vander Zee's proposal is the assertion that Christ is the quintessential sacrament. The two sacraments are the divinely sanctioned means by which believers share in their union with Christ. As such the sacraments operate in four ways: (1) by the power of the Holy Spirit, (2) through physical elements, (3) when united with the word, and (4) when received in faith. The first three features offer no real controversy between Baptists and Reformed understandings of the sacraments; it is the fourth that currently divides the two. The former understand faith as something humans have or exercise as a result of their own (libertarian) free will, while the latter prefer to think of faith itself as a gift of grace which is then freely offered back to God. Vander Zee defines faith in consistent Reformed fashion as follows:

God has accomplished our salvation in Jesus Christ for the whole human race before faith receives it. Faith is simply the opening of our eyes and hearts to this astounding truth: that we have been made new persons in Christ. Faith receives, faith grasps, faith trusts waqht God has done in Christ. Faith does not make it happen, for it has happened long before our faith was there to receive it. In fact, it is not a human work at all, though it seems to be...Faith plays no causal role whatsoever. It participates in salvation without in nay way displacing the primary work of the Holy Spirit. (p63).

Given this understanding of faith one may more clearly see why Baptists and Reformed disagree over the nature of the sacraments. The issue no longer revolves around what age one must be to partake of the sacrament, or what the specific nature of the sacrament is. Rather, the nature of *faith* is what is at issue. 'In the Reformation tradition (apart from the Anabaptists), the gospel sacraments are much more than naked signs. They are signs and seals of God's grace to us in Jesus Christ, symbols that carry with them what they symbolize' (p68). It is this which is crucial, according to Vander Zee.

*Christ, Baptism and the Lord's Supper* provides a fascinating, informative, and theologically stimulating argument that is ecumenical in its tone and yet strongly Reformed in its theological orientation. It is specifically written for Evangelicals who are Baptist or Reformed with the intent of stimulating further dialogue between the two on sacramentology and developing closer reciprocal relations where in the past there has been bitter dispute. Baptists may not like the idea of infant baptism and Vander Zee's arguments will probably fail to persuade them otherwise. But what Vander Zee does so well is to pinpoint what theological issues are actually at stake here, and then present a challenging and robust defence of his reading of Scripture and the tradition. It is precisely works such as this which Baptist theologians and pastors should be reading and interacting with so as to lead their denomination ever deeper into the mysteries of the faith.

**D.G. Hart. *Deconstructing Evangelicalism: Conservative Protestantism in the Age of Billy Graham*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004. (224pp.)**

The primary thesis of Hart's work is that modern 'evangelicalism' is a fiction. According to Hart, certain fundamentalist ('neo-evangelical') leaders of various denominations in North America constructed the notion of an evangelical identity in the 1940s in order to counter liberal Christianity on that continent and initiate a conservative Protestant face-lift (p13). The leaders in this new movement called 'evangelicalism' included Harold Ockenga, Carl Henry, John Warwick Montgomery, and most importantly Billy Graham. Together these men, and many others, created such associations as the Evangelical Foreign Missionary Association (1945), The Evangelical Theological Society (1949), the World Evangelical Fellowship (1951), and 'the mother of all these endeavors' (p24) the National Association of Evangelicals (1942). In addition to these associations many institutions arose to support the growing movement, foremost of which was Fuller Theological Seminary, founded in 1947, which functioned as the think tank for the movement. The magazine *Christianity Today*, founded in 1956, continues to be one of the more successful forums for the dissemination of evangelical ideas. In Hart's estimation, 'One of the interesting features of this organizational growth was the use of the term *evangelical* to describe these agencies and efforts. Almost by sheer tenacity neo-evangelicals had created a new religious identity, and *evangelical* was its designation' (p24).